



## **Advocates want health care for all**

**The House Finance Committee holds a second day of hearings on proposals that would disqualify 3,000 children from receiving health care.**

**01:00 AM EST on Saturday, February 25, 2006**

**BY ELIZABETH GUDRAIS**  
**Journal State House Bureau**

PROVIDENCE -- It shouldn't matter whether children are U.S. citizens or not, advocates said at a budget hearing yesterday. All children, they said, deserve health care. "What matters is that we protect all our children from sickness and disease," Jametta O. Alston, the state child advocate, told the House Finance Committee yesterday. On a total proposed budget of \$1.6 billion for the Department of Human Services -- including \$722 million from state general revenues -- Governor Carcieri is proposing to save \$4 million next fiscal year by disqualifying 3,000 undocumented children from receiving state-paid health care through the RItE Care program. Those children are not eligible for such benefits under federal law, so the state receives no Medicaid reimbursement .

Juan Garcia, a community organizer for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence, testified with seven children standing behind him to make a point. "Can you tell which ones of them are undocumented and which are documented?" Garcia asked through a translator. "These children are living in Rhode Island," Garcia continued. "They're going to school in Rhode Island. They're going to grow up in Rhode Island. They're going to marry people from Rhode Island. Eventually, they're going to become citizens of Rhode Island and become productive members of society and contribute to our economy, which their parents do already."

Rhode Island is not the only state to offer health coverage for undocumented children, said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count. She said Massachusetts, New York and Washington state also offer such coverage. Rep. Paul E. Moura, D-Providence, objected to the use, by the governor and others, of the term "alien," which is how the federal government refers to noncitizens in the United States either legally or illegally. "This is a cut to children," Moura said. "Let's start calling it what it is. It's taking health care away from children."

Also controversial was Carcieri's proposal to save \$22.5 million -- \$9.1 million from state general revenues -- by ending RItE Care coverage for 6,800 parents who make at least 133 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$21,400 for a family of three. Currently, parents with family income up to 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible. By way of comparison, Rhode Island's parent coverage exceeds that currently offered in both Massachusetts and Connecticut, Ronald A. Lebel, the state director of human services,

said. He said Massachusetts covers parents up to 133 percent of the poverty level, and Connecticut up to 150 percent.

Already, 30 percent of patients who visit the state's community health centers are uninsured, said Kerrie Jones Clark, executive director of the Rhode Island Health Center Association. She said an additional 10,000 uninsured residents would cost the state \$3.2 million in uncompensated care if each of them visits an emergency room once next year. Lebel expressed regret over the depth of the proposed cuts. RIte Care was "one of the last resorts in our discussions with the governor," he said, but the state faces an estimated \$232-million deficit next fiscal year.

Marti Rosenberg, executive director of Ocean State Action, suggested that the legislature shift its mindset away from cutting. "If everything is on the table, the revenue side of the budget must be on the table," Rosenberg said. "You don't want to use the T word, so I'll raise it for you. . . . The wealthiest people in Rhode Island have received two rounds, three rounds of tax cuts over the last number of years from the federal government." Budget hearings continue Tuesday with the Department of Environmental Management, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, and the offices of the attorney general, state fire marshal and public defender.

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